

COMPETING NATIONALISMS IN THE CONTESTATIONS OVER SIKHS' ROLE IN 1857

PRITAM SINGH

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The British annexation of Punjab in 1849 and the ‘Indian sepoy mutiny’/ ‘war of independence’ in 1857 are two historical events that are very close to each other in time but are imbued with vastly different meanings and degrees of significance in the imagination of Punjabi/Sikh nationalism and Indian nationalism.² For Punjabi/Sikh nationalism, 1849 signifies the tragic end of 50 years of sovereign Punjabi/Sikh state, and in comparison with that, 1857 is a date of relatively minor significance. For Indian nationalism, on the contrary, 1849 is of relatively ‘minor significance’- it is one date among many that signify the consolidation of British empire in ‘India’. In comparison with that, 1857 for the Indian nationalists is a date of huge meaning and significance - the Indian nationalist historiography presents this as the first war of independence from the British imperial rule. Its significance is underlined with the rise of BJP majority government in New Delhi as it takes the writings of M.S. Golwalkar, Veer Savarkar and other right wing Hindu nationalists seriously. As has been debated by other scholars, the thrust of new Indian historiography is distinctly towards recognising non-Congress groups and movements during the colonial rule. As a self-declared Hindu nationalist Veer Savarkar, of course, is the author of first major publication on 1857. He published it after devoting considerable time on it during his youthful days at India House in London. It is noteworthy how he emphasised the role of Sikhs and generally of Punjab - which subsequent writers have taken up - that had the Sikhs sided with the mutineers, India would have gained freedom almost a century earlier.

The divergence of Punjab from the rest of Indian provinces and especially from its neighbouring eastern provinces underlies far more deeper forces not acknowledged by latter day historians swayed by Indian ideology which stretches the idea of India as a nation to ancient times.³ This paper sees the contestation over Sikh role in 1857 as the issue of two competing nationalisms and attempts to tie up multiple and tangled aspects of the relationship between Punjabi/Sikh nationalism and Indian nationalism with the aim of drawing up as clear a picture as possible of the Sikh role in 1857. The paper is divided into three parts: one, I will provide a brief historical

overview of the rise of Sikhism and Punjabi nationalism with the aim of highlighting the significance of 1849 in Punjabi / Sikh imagination; two, I will attempt to provide some historical accounts of the Sikh role in 1857 and third, I will try to examine contesting interpretations of the Sikh role in 1857.

The Rise of Sikh/Punjabi Nationalism and the Significance of 1849

The founding of the Sikh faith by Guru Nanak (1469-1539) can be considered as the foundation stone in the building of Punjabi/Sikh nationalism. Although this is not usually stated but a reading of the history of Sikhs and Punjab clearly suggests that as Guru Nanak consciously founded a new faith, he was also laying the foundation of Punjabi nationalism. A short summary of Sikh historical events would illustrate this point.

Nanak was born in a village, Talwandi Rai Bhoe, now called Nankana Sahib, about forty miles from Lahore⁴. His was an upper caste Khatri Hindu family and his father was an administrative official in the office of a local Muslim chieftain. Nanak showed signs of early childhood rebellion against religious orthodoxy, hypocrisy and the Hindu caste hierarchy. In his youth, he used the medium of music, poetry, song and speech to preach the love of God and to attack the politically oppressive policies of the Muslim Mughal regime and the socially oppressive practices of the orthodox Brahminical Hindu religion. One scholar calls Guru Granth Sahib embodying Guru Nanak's teachings as an emancipatory narrative beyond two hegemonies of the time - the Vedic and the Mughal⁵. Guru Nanak also attacked the wealthy for their greed and spoke in favour of an equitable social status for women⁶. With significant departure from both Hindu and Muslim traditions, Nanak used the language of the masses, the Punjabi language, to preach his ideas.

This practice was in sharp contrast with that of the Hindu priests and the Muslim clergy, who used Sanskrit and Arabic respectively. Sanskrit and Arabic were inaccessible to the mass of the population; the traditional priestly classes used the old classical languages to exercise their intellectual hegemony. They believed that by using a language the masses could not understand, they could display their superiority of learning and develop a mystique around them.

Guru Nanak seems to have made a conscious break with this tradition. Rejecting Sanskrit, which used to be called *dev bhasha* (the language of the gods), he used Punjabi (*lok bhasha*, people's

language) to communicate his egalitarian teachings. He attracted a following among the lower castes, mainly Hindus but some converts from Islam too.

His followers came to be known as Sikhs. Sikh, a Punjabi word, means a learner or a disciple. It is a variant of the Sanskrit word *shishya*, which means pupil⁷. Some of his followers came from his own Khatri caste. The Khatris, though an upper caste, were one step lower than the highest Hindu caste, the Brahmins. The Khatris felt that in Sikhism they had found a religion in which they did not have to feel inferior to the Brahmins and, ironically, they had the satisfaction of feeling that they enjoyed the status of the highest caste in the new religion. The Khatris, therefore, felt that this was their own religion and this sense of ownership became a powerful source of attraction for them to become Sikhs. It will be vulgar sociological reductionism to attribute Khatri conversion to Sikhism to social mobility motives alone. Undoubtedly, many, if not most, Khatris would have joined Sikhism because of reasons of spirituality and religious piety⁸. However, for the large mass of Punjabis who were attracted to Guru Nanak's teachings, it was the content of his teachings (equality), the medium of his communication (the Punjabi language) and the form of his communication (poetry, song and music), which attracted them to Sikhism. He can therefore be legitimately characterised as the founder and articulator of a truly Punjabi religion. Roger Ballard, a Punjab studies scholar, in his attempt to conceptualise a Punjabi religion, pays particular attention to the Punjabi dimension of Nanak's teachings. He calls Punjab as 'the home base of Guru Nanak'⁹ and imagines Nanak to be calling all Punjabis to rise above all religious divisions among them:

'After all if Nanak were still with us to comment on current developments, it is far from unreasonable to suggest that he would wish to add the phrase *koi na Sikh* [no one is a Sikh] to his celebrated epigram *koi na Hindu, koi na Musulman* [no one is a Hindu, no one is a Muslim]¹⁰'.

Khushwant Singh, the most celebrated scholar of Sikh history, interprets the emergence of Guru Nanak as being a Punjabi nationalist response to the historical changes taking place in Punjab in the fifteenth century¹¹. He writes:

'The Punjab, being the main gateway into India, was fated to be the perpetual field of battle and the first home of all the conquerors. Few invaders, if any, brought wives with them, and most of those who settled in their conquered domains acquired local women. Thus the blood of many conquering races came to mingle, and many alien languages-Arabic, Persian, Pushto, and Turkish-came to be spoken in the land. Thus, too, was the animism of the aboriginal subjected to the Vedantic, Jain, and Buddhist religions of the Aryans, and to the Islamic faith of the Arabs, Turks, Mongols, Persians,

and Afghans. Out of this mixture of blood and speech were born the Punjabi people and their language. *There also grew a sense of expectancy that out of the many faiths of their ancestors would be born a new faith for the people of the Punjab. [...] By the end of the 15th century, the different races that had come together in the Punjab had lost the nostalgic memories of the lands of their birth and begun to develop an attachment to the land of their adoption. The chief factor in the growth of Punjabi consciousness was the evolution of one common tongue from a babel of languages. [...] Although the Punjabis were sharply divided into Muslims and Hindus, attempts had been made to bring about a rapprochement between the two faiths and a certain desire to live and let live had grown among the people. It was left to Guru Nanak and his nine successors to harness the spirit of tolerance and give it a positive content in the shape of Punjabi nationalism'*¹².

After Guru Nanak, there were nine other Gurus who provided spiritual and political leadership to the Sikh community. The Sikh faith remained a deeply pacifist faith until the period of fifth Guru Arjan Dev (1563-1606). He compiled the Sikh holy book, the Adi Granth (later known as Guru Granth Sahib). In compiling the Adi Granth, Guru Arjan showed a remarkable commitment to pluralism. He included in the Adi Granth, not only the teachings and the writings of all the five Sikh Gurus but also the contributions made between twelfth and sixteenth centuries by many Hindu Bhaktas (devotees of God) and Muslim Sufi saints¹³. Guru Arjan's other major contribution to the consolidation of the self-identity among the Sikhs as a community was construction of the Darbar Sahib/ Harmandir Sahib (later known more popularly as Golden Temple) in Amritsar¹⁴. To project the pluralism and the openness of the holiest Sikh shrine, Guru Arjan invited Punjab's most revered Muslim *sufi* saint Mian Mir to lay the foundation stone of the Golden Temple.

Guru Arjan came into conflict with the Mughal emperor Jahangir in Delhi because the Guru gave blessings to a rebel of the Mughal court who had come to the Guru seeking his blessings. This was the first conflict in the subsequent long history of the Punjab-based Sikhs' confrontation with the state power based in Delhi. This ended in tragedy as Guru Arjan was tortured to death in 1606 by the order of the Mughal Emperor, thus becoming the first martyr of the small Sikh community¹⁵. His son Hargobind (1595-1644), who became the sixth Guru, abandoned the apparent pacifist tradition and asked his followers to become armed and indeed led some battles against the Mughal rulers. He also introduced the theory and practice of the marriage between religion and politics by wearing two swords, one symbolising spiritual power and the other temporal power. He constructed the Akal Takht (the throne of Timeless God) across the Harmandir where he held regular court deliberating both spiritual and worldly affairs of his followers. At the Akal Takht, he sat on a throne like an emperor while holding the court¹⁶.

The period of Guruship of the seventh guru, Har Rai (1630-1661), and that of the eighth guru, Har Krishan (1656-1664), was one of quiet organisation of the Sikh community. The ninth guru, Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675), came into conflict with the Mughal emperor because he defended the religious rights of the Brahmin Hindu community, which was being targeted for persecution by the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb. The Guru was tortured to death along with his three associates in Delhi on November 11, 1675¹⁷. His son, Gobind Singh (1666 – 1708), became the tenth and the last living guru of the Sikhs.

Guru Gobind Singh made the most original and imaginative contribution in transforming the Sikh community into a community of ‘Saint-Soldiers’ i.e. a community of people who were inspired by a moral-religious vision of righteousness to take up arms against oppressive rulers. In the history of the evolution of the distinct identity of the Sikhs, the creation of the Khalsa (the community of the pure) in 1699 by Guru Gobind Singh remains the most defining moment in the history of the Sikhs. The Sikhs had acquired by then an almost complete package of elements making up their distinct identity – a holy book (the Guru Granth Sahib), a holy city (Amritsar), a holy religious centre (The Harmandir, known colloquially as ‘The Golden Temple’), a centre for taking political decisions (the Akal Takht at Amritsar) and a distinctive physical appearance with uncut hair. The only element missing in this package was the control of state power, which they were to acquire through their armed might later in 1799 when a Sikh chieftain, Ranjit Singh, became the ruler of Punjab. His death on June 27, 1839 resulted in a bloody succession war and eventually in 1849 in the British annexation of Punjab.

The Significance of 1849 in Sikh/Punjabi Imagination

To capture the significance of 1849 in the historical consciousness of the Sikhs/Punjabis, it is important to highlight another date in the history of Punjab province, the year of 1799.

By the end of eighteenth century, the Sikhs as the vanguard of Punjabi nationalism had become virtual rulers of Punjab. The Sikh struggle of this period brought into prominence several men of remarkable competence who not only ‘built up the Khalsa Commonwealth but also won back the confidence of the Muslim peasantry’¹⁸. Sikh resistance against the Persian and Afghan invaders and their Mughal collaborators ‘built up (perhaps unconsciously) the notion that the Punjab would be

better off if it were ruled by Punjabis rather than remain a part of the kingdom of Kabul or the Mughal Empire'¹⁹. An English traveller, George Forster, writing in 1783, observed:

'The discordant interests which agitate the Sicque [sic] nation, and the constitutional genius of the people, must incapacitate them, during the existence of these causes, from becoming a formidable offensive power [...] Should any future cause call forth the combined efforts of the Sicques [sic] to maintain the existence of empire and religion, we may see some ambitious chief led on by his genius and success, and absorbing the power of his associates, display, from the ruins of their Commonwealth, the standards of monarchy [.]'²⁰

This prophetic observation became true sixteen years later in 1799 when an 'ambitious chief' Maharaja Ranjit Singh 'led by his genius and success, and absorbing the power of his associates', occupied Lahore.

The Empire of the Sikhs (1799-1849)²¹

In 1799, Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) captured Lahore and became the first and only Sikh emperor of Punjab. Punjab existed as a sovereign state for fifty years (1799-1849) before it was annexed by the British in 1849 and merged with the rest of India under colonial rule. Though Ranjit Singh's Punjab was a Muslim-majority country and the administrators were chosen on merit not only from the main religious communities – Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs – but also from European Christian visitors, the fact that the ruler was a powerful Sikh maharaja remains embedded in the consciousness of both the Sikh elites and the masses that the Sikhs were once rulers of an independent sovereign state of Punjab²². The importance of this historical memory among the Sikhs can be gauged from the historical and literary narratives by the Sikhs which portray Maharaja Ranjit Singh as the most important Sikh so far after the ten gurus. He is referred to as the 'Lion of the Punjab'²³. Sikhs remember him in numerous ways- annual visits to Lahore and through books, articles, and historical novels relating to his life and rule. To cite just one example - the titles of two articles published by a UK-based Punjabi weekly on the occasion of Ranjit Singh's 169th death anniversary are symbolic of the manner in which his regime has become a part of the historical memory of the Punjabis. One article is entitled *Punjabian de sanjhe raj da sansthapak: sherei- Punjab Maharaja Ranjit Singh* (The founder of the shared/common rule of the Punjabis- the Lion of Punjab Maharaja Ranjit Singh)²⁴

and the other is entitled *Sherei-Punjab Mahanbali Ranjit Singh di syasi soojh* (The political sagacity of the Lion of Punjab Maharaja Ranjit Singh)²⁵.

It will be fair to say that though Ranjit Singh's legacy remains a contested terrain, the overwhelming image of his rule in Punjabi consciousness is that his rule represented an era of Punjabi self-rule and sovereignty. On one hand, he represents the realisation of the Sikh dream of statehood and political sovereignty, and, on the other, he is a symbol of composite Punjabi identity and is celebrated as a secular Punjabi ruler²⁶. An eminent Punjabi historian, Indu Banga, articulates this two-fold historical importance of Ranjit Singh very succinctly: 'In one sense Ranjit Singh created a Sikh kingdom but in another it was a Punjabi enterprise'²⁷. There is a minor third way of interpreting his legacy. This is a Sikh nationalist view influenced by Marxism that criticises the feudal dimensions of Ranjit Singh's mode of governance while arguing how he never betrayed the collective interests of the Sikh nation²⁸.

Within a decade after Ranjit Singh's death on June 27, 1839, the British annexed Punjab after the almost leaderless Sikh army was defeated in the bitterly fought Anglo-Sikh wars²⁹. Ranjit Singh's last surviving son, Dalip Singh (1838-1893) was converted to Christianity in 1853, and brought to England in 1854 where he was given a feudal estate at Elvelden to afford the luxury lifestyle of a prince. When he grew up, he reconverted to Sikhism but was not allowed to go to Punjab for fear of becoming a rallying point for the Sikhs to demand the return of their lost kingdom. Bitter, disappointed and lonely, he died in a humble hotel room in Paris on October 22, 1893³⁰.

The British annexation of Punjab in 1849 after the defeat of the Sikh army had three significant consequences. First, the conquering British generals, impressed by the bravery of the defeated Sikh soldiers and generals, decided to incorporate them with honour into the British army in India³¹. Specially designated Sikh regiments of the Britain's Indian army were raised where meticulous attention was devoted to respect the cultural and religious practices of the Sikhs. This resulted in a strategic success, though temporary, in turning the Sikhs into allies of the British rule in India. Second, the defeated Sikhs nurtured a grievance against East India Company armies which included thousands of Poorbias -the descriptor the Sikhs used for the Indians who were part of British Indian armies and most of them hailed from UP, Bihar and Bengal provinces. Third, the British were aware of such Sikh grievances as they faced the danger of the mutiny and rallied the Sikhs to fight against the 'Poorbias'³². A combination of these three factors meant a long-term troubled relationship; generating distrust between the Punjabi Sikhs and the rest of India, especially the 'Hindi heartland' of Eastern Provinces³³. The people of Punjab in general and the Sikhs in particular identified themselves with Ranjit Singh's Punjab as their sovereign homeland. This is true of Punjabi/Sikhs

even in those territories which were not under Ranjit Singh's direct control. One indicator of an average Punjabi/Sikh's identification with Ranjit Singh is that many of them fought against British annexation of Punjab without ever having been in the employment of his army. Here I would like to narrate a personal story.

The Story My Grandfather Told Me

My grandfather Sardar Sandhura Singh Gill (1890-1972) narrated to me a story about the participation of his great grandfather in one of the Anglo-Sikh wars. This story fascinated me then and has continued to fascinate the historian within me ever after. The reasons for my fascination have, however, changed over time. He told me that one day his great grandfather was working in the fields (it was 1840s after Ranjit Singh's death) that he received a message sent by Maharani Jindan (the youngest and the last queen of Ranjit Singh, and the mother of Dalip Singh - the youngest son of Ranjit Singh who was exiled to Britain) to the general population of Punjab that their Raj was under threat from the advancing British army and they should come with whatever weapon they can get hold off to fight and save their Raj. My great great grandfather was furious with anger on learning about this threat to their Raj. He immediately stopped working in the fields and walked towards the battlefield front as per the information given by the messenger sent by Rani Jindan. He was physically so powerful, my grandfather told me, that when he was walking furiously towards the battlefield and found at one point that his path was obstructed by a tree, he uprooted the tree single-handedly.

There are several aspects of this story: I was a young kid when my grandfather told me this story in the late 1950s and I did not ask him any questions I should have and could have, had I been older. I did not ask about in which one of the Anglo - Sikh wars my great great grandfather fought, what happened to him (did he die?), did my grandfather meet his great grandfather or did he hear this story from his parents or grandparents. The aspect of the story which fascinated me most at that time was about the physical prowess of my great great grandfather in uprooting a tree single-handedly. As I grew older, I started feeling pride in belonging to a family whose ancestors had resisted British imperialism though the environmentalist in me now feels awkward about the uprooting of the tree!

From a historical point of view, several other aspects of this oral historical narrative are very valuable. One, my ancestors lived in an area under the jurisdiction of the princely state of Faridkot (not under Ranjit Singh's jurisdiction). This tells us about the widespread and deep identification of the Punjabis in general and Sikhs in particular with Ranjit Singh's regime. Second, ordinary people, and not only salaried soldiers of Ranjit Singh's army, participated in the battles to defend his regime. Third, in the historical consciousness of ordinary Sikhs (my grandfather was well-off but not a rich landowner); the final down fall of the Punjabi kingdom of Ranjit Singh in 1849 was an event of great and tragic significance. Fourth, 1857 was not a part of the historical memory of the Punjabis and Sikhs at least in the twentieth century. My grandfather never mentioned 1857 to me. I came to know about 1857 only from the Indian nationalist history as taught at school, though I knew about Anglo-Sikh wars and 1849 as part of growing up in a Sikh household. As our area is close to two battlefields of the Anglo-Sikhs wars – Ferozeshah and Mudki (and possibly Sobaraon) - I often wonder which one my ancestor fought in.

Another Story

I had a very fruitful exchange of memories of family conversations about 1857 with a UK Sikh businessman, Jaswant Singh Grewal, on 7 May 2006. Grewal is in his 60s. His grandfather Sardar Hazoorah Singh was a part of the British Army in Afghanistan. Grewal believes that it was in 1878 that his grandfather was promoted as a Subedar and, according to Grewal that was the highest promotion an Indian could get at that time in the British army. Grewal's father was a policeman posted in Singapore. Although the dates of his father's posting are not clear, it was sometimes in the early part of the 20th century. What is interesting is that Grewal remembers conversations with his father about the Sikhs' role in 1857. According to Grewal, his father told him that it was widely believed that Maharaja Ranjit Singh had requested help from the Hindu princes of the neighbouring regions against the possibility of British annexation of his regime and that these princes had refused to help Ranjit Singh. According to Grewal, the Sikhs' identification with Ranjit Singh's regime led them to hate these unhelpful princes and that this was the main reason the Sikh soldiers refused to help these princes when they were in conflict with the British rulers in 1857. The point about Grewal's recollections of conversations with his father is not whether these are historically correct or not but that these recollections are a part of the collective memory of the Sikhs about the link between the role of the downfall of Ranjit Singh's regime and the Sikhs' revengeful attitude against the Poorbias in 1857. The remarkable thing about this collective memory is that it seems to persist even today. Karam Singh Historian has written about these stories in detail while Sant Vaisakha Singh

has also mentioned how only a generation ago many Sikh elders used to remember the participation of their families in the Anglo-Sikh wars on behalf of the Khalsa - or what they were doing when these wars were fought³⁴.

The Role of Hindustanis/Poorbias in Annexing Punjab

The participation of the Hindustanis as a part of the British army in the annexation of Punjab created the first major fault-line in the relations between Punjabi/Sikh nationalism and Indian nationalism. Punjabis hated the Hindustanis, whom they called Poorbias, for being a part of the conquering army. The reputable historian Ganda Singh, who debunked the formulation that the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny was a national war of independence, explained the context of the use of word Poorbias: ‘One of my critics thinks that I have ‘derisively’ referred to the soldiers of the Bengal Army as ‘Poorbia’. Not at all. If he were to refer to contemporary records of the Central and provincial governments and to the regimental histories of the then Bengal Army, he would find the words ‘Poorbia’ and ‘Hindoostanee’ then commonly used for men beyond the Jamuna. [See MacMunn’s *The Armies of India, the Punjab Mutiny Reports, and Regimental History of the 54th Sikhs*]’. And in the Punjab, the word ‘Poorbia’ was more commonly used than ‘Hindoostanee’, as it continues to the present day, and there is no derision attached to it³⁵. Ganda Singh also points out ‘that the majority of the Poorbia soldiers were high-caste Hindus’³⁶. It is reasonable to say that the Punjabis viewed themselves as a different nation from the Poorbias before the Anglo-Sikh Wars but there were no feelings of animosity towards the Poorbias. Many Poorbias were recruited into the army of Ranjit Singh. Although the Punjabis looked upon the Poorbias as belonging to a different nation and they harboured suspicion about the loyalty of the Poorbias to Ranjit Singh’s kingdom, there was certainly no hatred for them. However, after the Anglo-Sikhs Wars which Shah Mohammed called ‘Jang Hind-Punjab’, the Punjabis hated the Poorbias as much as they hated the British for annexing Punjab³⁷. Lieutenant-Colonel Chardin Johnson of the 9th Lancers captured the complexity, from a British colonial perspective, of this Punjabi/Sikh attitude towards the British and the Poorbias in the context of 1857:

‘The Sikhs don’t love us one bit, but hate sepoys [Poorbias] like poison...Moreover, they are the lastly conquered of the Indian races and have not forgotten what British Pluck can do. They like the cause now, for the sepoys have mutilated and tortured their men...and their blood is up on our side

at the present- but, this business over, they may play us the same trick as the sepoy ruffians, anyday [sic]. There is no sympathy between us - we despise niggers [Sikhs], they hate us³⁸.

Marx and Engels had taken keen interest in the expanding British empire in India. Engels, who had even learnt Persian, to enable him to follow closely the expanding British empire in India, had viewed very sympathetically the Sikh resistance to the British annexation of Punjab because he viewed that ‘the Sikhs were always the most formidable opponents of the British among the nations of India, they have formed a comparatively powerful empire...and hate both Hindus and Musulmanns’³⁹. Engels then goes on to speculate that the Sikhs’ refusal to side with the mutineers who wanted to restore the Mughal Rule was due to the Sikhs’ looking upon the turmoil as an opportunity to recover their lost empire. He writes, ‘What is more natural than that they [the Sikhs] should harbour the idea that the time had come when the British Raj shall be replaced by a Sikh raj, that a Sikh emperor is to rule India from Delhi or Calcutta?’⁴⁰.

It is clear that the Sikhs viewed 1857 from their own perspective. This perspective was a complex combination of harbouring a desire to become the rulers of India, dreading the re-emergence of the hated Mughal empire if the British were defeated and inflicting revenge on the hated Poorbias. One contemporary commentator noted particularly that ‘the Khalsa held the Hindustani in supreme contempt’⁴¹.

After 1857, the Sikhs’ relationship with the colonial rulers reflected two conflicting moods in the community. One was a mood of anger and revenge against the Raj for having annexed their kingdom, the other of demoralisation, resignation and adaptation to the historic reality of the power of the British empire. A section of the religious minded Sikhs and ex-soldiers of Ranjit Singh’s army gave expression to the mood of revenge by indulging in acts of violent and non-violent defiance of British rule⁴². Large numbers of Sikh peasants and soldiers sympathised silently with these acts of defiance but were also tempted by the lure of a career in the British army. The colonial rulers dealt very harshly with the small defiant section of the community and offered generous and seemingly honourable opportunities to the accommodationist section. A large number of Sikhs were recruited into the British army and their religious practices were respected with great care⁴³. The respect shown to the religious practices of the Sikh soldiers seemed to be the result of two considerations: first, it was an attempt at correcting the damage the British rulers had suffered in 1857 as a result of the real and rumoured disrespect shown to the religious practices of the Hindu and Muslim soldiers; second, the British had understood that Sikh soldiers true to the Saint-Soldier tradition of Guru Gobind Singh were likely to be a better and more motivated fighting force than the non-*Khalsa* tradition⁴⁴.

To conclude this part, the loss of the Sikh empire in 1849 was for Sikh/Punjabi nationalism, the end of a dream. The British rulers understood this feeling among the Punjabis/Sikhs and made systematic efforts to heal the wounds they had inflicted on Punjabi/Sikh consciousness. On the other hand, the Hindustanis did not realise in 1849 or in the following years before 1857 that they had incurred the wrath of the Punjabis for participating in the British wars to snatch their (Punjabis') independence.

The cost the Hindustanis paid for this insensitivity to Punjabi/Sikh sentiments was that they could not win any sympathy from the Sikhs in 1857. The Punjabis/Sikhs looked upon 1857 as a double opportunity: to inflict injury on the Hindustanis and to win the favour of the British who had been attempting strenuously to mend ways with the Punjabis/Sikhs.

The Sikh Role in 1857

There is irrefutable evidence that although some small number of Sikh soldiers mutinied against the British, the overwhelming majority of the Sikhs were allies of the British against the Hindustani mutineers in 1857⁴⁵. It will be a travesty of historical evidence if this Sikh alliance with the British is seen out of Punjab context. If the Punjab context is considered, we would notice that it is not only the Sikhs but also Punjabi Muslims and Hindus who had no sympathy with the Hindustani mutineers. According to Khushwant Singh except a few incidents, ‘the Punjab was not affected by the rebellion which convulsed the rest of northern India. Punjabi Mussalmans turned a deaf ear to their Hindustani co-religionists’ exhortation to jihad against the pig-eating despoilers of Islam. Punjabi Hindus and, with greater reason, the Sikhs refused to listen to the belated appeal to save Hindu dharma from beef-eating foreigners who used cow fat to grease their cartridges. This was not surprising because those, who in the summer of 1857 claimed to be crusaders for freedom, were the very people who eight years earlier had been the feringhees’s instruments in reducing the Punjabis to servitude’⁴⁶. What united the Punjabi Muslims, Hindus and the Sikhs was the spirit of Punjabi nationalism against the Hindustanis. Countless Punjabi Hindus (most eminent Diwan Mool Raj) and Punjabi Muslims along with the Sikhs had given their lives fighting against the Hindustanis in defending the sovereign state of Punjab during the Anglo-Sikh wars.⁴⁷ It would be more appropriate to call these wars as Anglo-Punjab wars. That is, in fact, how Shah Mohammed, the celebrated Punjabi poet, had characterised these wars as ‘Jang Hind-Punjab’. It is interesting to note in this context that a few Sikhs who sympathised with the mutineers were the ones whose spirit of Punjabi nationalism, it seems, had been diluted by being located outside Punjab and in the Hindustani territory: ‘There

were stray cases of Sikhs joining the mutineers. In Benares, a battalion of ‘Ludhiana Sikhs’ of the 37th native infantry mutinied on 3 June 1857. Many were killed or hanged. This triggered off a mutiny at Jewanpur, 70 miles from Benares. The Sikhs guarding the courthouse and treasury at Benares remained loyal⁴⁸. The Sikh soldiers had mutinied in small numbers at a number of other places too, but their motives seem to be mixed. For example, a small unit of Sikh soldiers had mutinied at Ropar in Punjab by displaying the Kesari flag of the Khalsa. They were mutinying not in solidarity with the Hindustanis but to signify the defiance of the sovereign spirit of the Khalsa⁴⁹. Some Sikh soldiers at Jhansi had mutinied and 21 of them were shot dead. Another group of Sikh soldiers stationed in the Meo cantonment in the central province had shown signs of discontentment and 80 of them were imprisoned in the Agra jail⁵⁰. The motives behind the rebellion of these Sikh soldiers could be a mixture of their autonomous defiance of the British rule and an expression of solidarity with the other mutineers.

By way of conclusion, it can be said that though the Punjabis including the Sikhs were angry with both the Hindustanis and the British for usurping their Punjab, when it came to choosing between the two when these two were at war with each other in 1857, the British were successful in winning over the Punjabis/Sikhs to their side because of four main reasons: one, the British showed utmost care in respecting the religious sensibilities of the Sikhs, whilst the upper caste segments of the Hindustanis Hindus had shown disrespect towards the Sikhs ; two, the British offered economic incentives mainly in the form of attractive employment opportunities in the army to ordinary Sikhs and extended territorial jurisdiction to the Sikh rajas; third, the Sikhs saw 1857 as an opportunity to take revenge on the hated Hindustani/Poorbias; and fourth, the Sikhs feared the return of the Mughal rule if the British were defeated.

The role of the Punjabis in general and the Sikhs in particular in 1857 cannot be understood in a meaningful way by characterising the Sikh role as a betrayal of Indian nationalism as is sometimes done in the Indian nationalist historiography⁵¹. To argue that the Sikhs betrayed the Indians in 1857 is to assume that Punjabis/Sikhs considered themselves as a part of something that could be called Indian nation in 1857 because betrayal assumes a relationship of belonging to one that is being betrayed. The available historical evidence suggests very strongly that what would be called regional identities in today’s Indian nationalist language (Punjabis/Sikhs, Marathas, Bengalis, Rajputs etc.) were very strong in the early part of the 19th century right up to the third quarter of the 19th century. The idea of India as a nation started being aired only in the last quarter of the 19th century⁵². It is only by recognising the strength of Punjabi consciousness and Punjabi/Sikh nationalism that we can hope to start understanding the meaning and rationality of Punjabi/Sikh role in 1857.

(I am thankful for helpful comments from Darshan Tatla on an earlier version of this paper and to the Edinburgh conference participants where this paper was first presented. The usual disclaimer applies).

Notes

¹ This is a revised version of the paper submitted first at the *Mutiny on the Margins* conference at Edinburgh University, July 23-26, 2007.

² Punjabi nationalism and Sikh nationalism can have distinctive as well as overlapping identities. Their distinctive identities come to the fore when they are internally in conflict with each other and their overlapping identities become salient when they can converge in multiple modes of conflict and cooperation with an external identity such as Indian nationalism. For a further discussion on this, see Pritam Singh (1999). I am using Punjabi/Sikh nationalism together to suggest that in the historical context of this article, Punjabi nationalism and Sikh nationalism were inseparable from each other - they had overlapping and converging identities.

³ See Anderson (2013) for a devastating critique of this Indian ideology and its review by me Pritam Singh (2014).

⁴ See Khushwant Singh (1999: 29-30). Instead of following the usual practice of using the initials of the authors cited, I have mentioned the full name of all the scholars with the Singh surname. This has been done to avoid possible confusion resulting from the many Singh entries in the References.

⁵ M P Terence, Samuel. *A Subaltern Reading of Sikh Scripture* (Internet). MP Terence Samuel Blogspot; 2009. Accessed (2 February 2019). Available at:
<https://mpterencesamuel.blogspot.co.uk/2009/10/subaltern-reading-of-sikh-scripture.html?m=1>

⁶ See Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh (1993)

⁷ See Harbans Singh (1994: 1). See also Nesbitt (2005: 2)

⁸ For a slightly detailed discussion of this point, see Pritam Singh (2010: 117).

⁹ See Ballard (1999: 14)

¹⁰ See Ballard (1999: 16). Translation added

¹¹ See Khushwant Singh (1999: 13-16)

¹² See Khushwant Singh (1999: 13-14). Italics added

¹³ For full details on these contributors, see Brown (1999: 198-199). The contributors to SGGS who came from Hindu and Muslim backgrounds were intellectual rebels in those traditions.

¹⁴ See Kerr (2001)

¹⁵ For details, see Vohra (1979), Smart (1992: 99), Grewal (1998: 42) and Pashaura Singh (2005) and (2006)

¹⁶ Khushwant Singh (1999: 63). Hew McLeod attributes the emergence of violence in Sikh political practice to the large-scale entry of the Jat farming community into Sikhism. Though he makes a probing analysis of the Jat dimension in the evolution of the Sikh community from the period of the third Guru to the sixth Guru, he unnecessarily succumbs to an element of essentialism in characterising the Jats as prone to violence: ‘The death of Guru Arjan may have persuaded Guru Hargobind of the need for tighter organisation, but we find it difficult to envisage a large number of unarmed Jats suddenly becoming commanded to take up weapons. *The Jats will have remained Jats*’ (McLeod 1996: 12, italics added). This essentialist characterisation is contrary to McLeod’s own general method of historical-evolutionary analysis of the changes in the development of the Sikh community. I have had a very fruitful, friendly and yet sharp private correspondence with Hew McLeod regarding this comment of mine after the publication of my paper (Pritam Singh 2007) which I had sent to him. I have depended upon that paper for this section of the present article.

¹⁷ Khushwant Singh (1999: 73-74) and Grewal (1998: 72). For a modern human rights interpretation of Guru Tegh Bahadur’s martyrdom, see Pritam Singh (1998:239). This interpretation was a key input into Amnesty International’s decision to declare Guru Tegh Bahadur as one of the five eminent men of the seventeenth century whose ideas and actions were decisive in the struggle for human rights in the seventeenth century. The other four selected by AI are: John Lilburne (1617-1657), John Locke (1632-1704), William Pen (1644-1718) and Voltaire (1694-1778). Amnesty International brought out a publication on this subject to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Amnesty International 1998).

¹⁸ See Khushwant Singh (1999: 183)

¹⁹ See Khushwant Singh (1999: 183)

²⁰ See Forster 1798 quoted by Gupta (1992: 495-496)

²¹ I have given this section its title in memory of my friend Sardar Patwant Singh, who died in 2009. He co-wrote a book with this title (Patwant Singh and Jyoti M. Rai 2009). For my obituary of Patwant Singh, see Pritam Singh (2009).

²² Khushwant Singh provides the details of high offices held by Muslims and Hindus (1999: 294) and by several Europeans in his chapter ‘Europeanisation of the Army’ (1999:258-67).

²³ See Khushwant Singh (1997)

²⁴ See Khushwant Singh (2008: 42). Translation added

²⁵ See Gupta (2008: 37-40). Translation added

²⁶ Tahir analysing the work of a Punjabi Muslim poet, Qadiryar (b.1802) ‘who ranks amongst the foremost Punjabi poets’ (Tahir 1999: 55), argues that the poet celebrated in one of his works, the *Var* (Ballad), the military victories of Hari Singh Nalwa over the Pathans and Afghans, Hari Singh Nalwa was one of the most distinguished Sikh generals in Ranjit Singh’s army. Tahir states that:

'...[if] the *Var* is examined, no where does the poet mention the Muslim or Islam. It is the Pathan and the Afghan against the Punjabi. He composed the *Var* neither as a Muslim nor as a Sikh, but as a Punjabi. Hari Singh is written of as a Punjabi battling against the Afghans and the Pathans. "*The provincial feeling may have been prompted by the political situation prevailing in Ranjit Singh's Punjab.*"' (Tahir 1999: 64, italics added).

Darshan Singh analyses the work of another eminent Punjabi Muslim poet, Shah Muhammad, who in his war-ballad written in 1849, bemoans the defeat of the Sikh army in the first Anglo-Sikh war as a defeat of the Punjabi kingdom of Ranjit Singh and refers to the war as 'a war between Punjab and Hind (Hindustan)' (1999: 73). Hindustan is one of the Hindi words used for India.

²⁷ Banga (2000:27). See also Grewal (1981)

²⁸ See Ajmer Singh (2007: 35)

²⁹ See Hasrat (1992 and 1992a) also Tatla (n.d.)

³⁰ See Wylam (1992). See also Jeet (1999)

³¹ Lord Hugh Gough, the British commander-in-chief, under whose leadership the two Anglo-Sikh wars were fought, paid a remarkable tribute to the defeated Sikhs:

'Policy precludes me publicly recording my sentiments on the splendid gallantry of our fallen foe, or to record the acts of heroism displayed, not only individually, but almost collectively, by the Sikh sardars and the army; and I declare were it not from a deep conviction that my country's good required the sacrifice, I would have wept to have witnessed the fearful slaughter of so devoted a body of men'. Cited by Hasrat (1992: 168)

³² See Omissi (1994) and Mazumdar (2003)

³³ See Kudasiya (2006) for a useful deployment of the concept of Hindustani/Hindi heartland.

Chatterjee (2007) is a good use of the concept of Hindustani heartland in arguing for a case of the emergence of 'a new identity of the Sikhs of Punjab' in opposition to Hindustani heartland in the context of 1857 conflict.

³⁴ This information has been shared with me by Darshan Tatla in a personal email correspondence (9/10/2017).

³⁵ See Ganda Singh (1969: 25-26)

³⁶ See Ganda Singh (1969: 28)

³⁷ For a good sample of Punjabi/Sikh nationalist view regarding the Poorbias, see Noor (2005)

³⁸ Quoted by James (1998: 267).

³⁹ See Marx and Engles (1959). Cited by Tatla (1984)

⁴⁰ For a more detailed examination of Marx and Engels's views on Sikhs and 1857, see Tatla (1984). It is important to note that the title of Marx and Engels's book was not chosen by them and reflects the Moscow choice perhaps for political reasons of diplomatic affinity with the official view of the post-1947 Indian state regarding 1857.

⁴¹ See Cave-Brown (1861)

⁴² Bhai Maharaj Singh and Baba Ram Singh were the two most eminent Sikh leaders who articulated the Sikh grievances against the British for annexing their sovereign Punjabi state. Bhai Maharaj Singh, a religious leader, took to arms to defend the sovereign Punjabi state during the Anglo-Sikh wars, never surrendered to the British, tried to organise an underground armed movement after the British annexation of Punjab, was eventually arrested and exiled to solitary confinement in Singapore where he went blind and died on 5 July 1856. He acquired a legendary status among the Sikhs because of his saintly character and uncompromising crusade against the British. A British official, who had arrested him in 1849, was so impressed by his integrity and moral stature that he said that the Bhai was not an ordinary man and was to the Punjabis what Jesus was to the most zealous of Christians. See Ahluwalia 1972 and 1997. Baba Ram Singh, an ex-soldier of Ranjit Singh's army, rose to prominence after 1857 for organising non-violent protest against the British rule mainly in the form of boycott of goods manufactured in Britain (e.g. cloth), law courts, government services (e.g. postal services) and government schools. Some of his followers, who came to be known as Kukas, later took to violence. Baba Ram Singh was charged with sedition and exiled to Rangoon where he lived in the same place where the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, had been kept in his exile charged also with sedition. Baba Ram Singh died in 1885, the year the Indian National Congress was founded. Mahatma Gandhi copied many aspects of the Kuka's non-violent forms of struggle, but this remains largely unrecognised in the Indian nationalist historiography. See Fauja Singh (1965) and Ahluwalia (1997a).

⁴³ See Talbot (1988 and 1991) and Omissi (1994)

⁴⁴ See Omissi (1994)

⁴⁵ See Kaye (1864), James (1998), Khushwant Singh (2006), Dalrymple (2007)

⁴⁶ See Khushwant Singh (2006: 109)

⁴⁷ Diwan Mool Raj was a brilliant military commander of Ranjit Singh's army. He led the Khalsa army in Multan against the invading British army and gave his life in one of the Anglo-Sikh wars.

⁴⁸ See Hilton (1957) cited by Khushwant Singh (2006: 109)

⁴⁹ See Ajmer Singh (2007: 47)

⁵⁰ See Kaye (1864: 495)

⁵¹ An example of such an historical writing is a piece written by Akhilesh Mithal who wrote a weekly column on 1857 for the Asian Age for almost a whole year during 2006-07. He wrote: 'The Sikhs whether led by the Akalis or by Captain Amarendra Singh of Patiala, have antecedents of loyalty to the British'. See Mithal (2006: 22)

⁵² For a longer historical view of the vicissitudes of the relationship between Punjabi/Sikh nationalism and Indian nationalism, see Pritam Singh (2008) especially chapter 2.

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*Pritam Singh has a DPhil from Oriel College, Oxford, and taught at Oxford Brookes University for thirty years where he was awarded Professor Emeritus status. He is presently Teaching Associate and Academic Visitor at the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies.